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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000150

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SUBJECT: MILINKEVICH AND PARTISAN LEADERS SHOWING SIGNS OF
DEEP DIVIDE

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d)

Summary

1. (C) Since the January 14 municipal elections, the United Democratic Forces (UDF) have focused almost exclusively on organizing another democratic opposition congress, tentatively set for March 17-18. However, the coalition seems ill-prepared to hold a forum by that date. The UDF has yet to reach consensus on a common action plan, on a common message to democratic-minded Belarusians, and most importantly, on the issue of leadership of the coalition. De facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich, whose behavior and decisions are becoming increasingly erratic, has formally announced his boycott of the congress. Right-leaning political parties in the UDF recognize the value of Milinkevich's participation in the congress and will most likely decide to postpone the event until a consensus has been reached. The parties are attempting to bring Milinkevich back into the fold, but it is highly unlikely that he will reconsider his boycott. The failure to make progress on the congress is symptomatic of the schism within the coalition. End summary.

Congress Is Necessary, Despite The Setbacks

2. (C) Opposition political parties admit that following the March 2006 presidential election campaign, the opposition coalition has fallen into infighting and stagnation. United Civic Party (UCP) Deputy Chairman Igor Shinkarik and Belarusian Social Democratic Party (BSDP) "Gramada" acting Chairman (in place of jailed opposition leader Aleksandr Kozulin) Anatoly Levkovich told Pol/Econ Chief on February 8 that opposition activists and democratic-minded Belarusians have grown disappointed and weary of the UDF's inactivity. The incoherent message and lackluster performance of the opposition parties in the run up to the rigged January municipal elections only reinforced the coalition's low standing among Belarus' democrats. Thus, according to the opposition parties, the coalition needs a defining event to set the opposition back on track and spur the coalition forward - i.e., another congress.

3. (C) Opposition parties explain that a congress would restore unity to the coalition by addressing the following goals. First, a congress would force the coalition to develop a common message to democratic-minded Belarusians. The message would take note of the obvious tense relationship between Minsk and Moscow and would lay out the UDF's vision for a democratic, prosperous Belarus that is closely connected to its eastern and western neighbors. Second, a congress would force the opposition to establish a common strategy and an action plan to foment democratic change in

Belarus.

¶4. (C) Most importantly, a congress would lay the "leadership issue" to rest. Party leaders had hoped to set in motion the principle of "rotational leadership," where each of the major party leaders, and Milinkevich, would serve as coalition leader on a rotational basis. The U.S. NGO International Republican Institute (IRI) field office director recently told Poloff that the party leaders recognize the deficiencies of rotational leadership but remain reluctant to use the congress as an opportunity to reinstall Milinkevich as UDF leader. Regardless, a congress would force the parties to resolve the thorny but inevitable issue of leadership.

Milinkevich Sets Conditions On His Participation

¶5. (C) Milinkevich issued a statement on February 14 announcing the "impossibility" of his participation in the upcoming congress but told Ambassador on February 15 that his participation was still up in the air. (Comment: Milinkevich's penchant for wavering on issues is legendary. End comment.) Milinkevich explained to Ambassador that he would participate in a democratic congress that chose a single leader (i.e., him) and welcomed non-party activists and NGO representatives. He pointed out the 2005 democratic congress as an excellent example of an event that unified and broadened the democratic camp and stressed that the upcoming congress should be restructured to duplicate the 2005 event.

Current Obstacles

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¶6. (C) Despite the opposition parties' interest in organizing a congress by March 17, the very objectives of the congress currently serve as the main roadblocks to holding the event.

-- Leadership of the Coalition: BNF deputy Igor Ivashkevich, UCP Shinkarik, and BSDP Levkovich conceded to Pol/Econ Chief on February 16 that the key issue preventing the congress from taking place is Milinkevich's refusal to accept the rotational leadership principle and the selection of delegates to the congress. Ivashkevich and Shinkarik admitted that their party rank and file, particularly in the regions, are tired of the squabbling at the national level and are demanding that their leadership take the necessary steps to ensure Milinkevich's participation in the congress.

Milinkevich's possible boycott from the congress has stirred up so much tension in the BNF ranks that Ivashkevich predicted his party would ultimately follow Milinkevich's lead and also boycott the congress. Shinkarik reluctantly agreed with Ivashkevich's assessment and commented that his party would also likely withdraw participation from the congress if Milinkevich and BNF withdrew. Thus, only BSDP, BCP, and a couple small leftist parties would be left to hold a congress, and Levkovich doubted his party would take part in such an event, given that the leftist parties already held a conference in December 2006.

-- No Common Message or Action Plan: Party leaders repeatedly tell us that they are only a "few weeks away" from reaching agreement on a common message and action plan. However, Emboffs recently learned from IRI that the leaders of the opposition parties are no closer to the development of a common message than they were several months ago. Although party leaders say that they all agree to a message that would stress close ties with Russia and the West, they remain at loggerheads on the details of an alternative vision for Belarus. Similarly, the action plan would most likely focus on preparations for the 2008 Parliamentary elections, but the

parties have yet to reach a consensus on specific actions or activities (other than the annual March 25 and April 26 demonstrations).

-- Venue: Another key obstacle is finding a location for the event. BCP's Valeriy Ukhnyalov told Poloff on February 13 that the GOB has uniformly rejected UDF requests to rent suitable conference space in Minsk. Consequently, a conference hall in Ukraine would be the most likely venue. Ivashkevich noted, however, that the coalition has yet to request conference space there and when it does, the process for securing the space would take at least one month.

What Next?

17. (C) The political parties are determined to organize a congress as quickly as possible, but Shinkarik and Ivashkevich doubted the congress would take place before May 2007. Ivashkevich said that his party on February 16 will formally propose to Milinkevich and the other parties that the congress include the delegates who participated in the October 2005 democratic congress, in addition to the delegates recently selected through signature collection in during January 2007 municipal election campaign. The net increase in delegates would be 100-150 (after sorting out those were elected to both congresses) and therefore the total number of delegates would be 700-750. Ivashkevich explained that including the 2005 delegates would "eliminate" Milinkevich's often-repeated argument that the congress was made up mainly of party activists. Shinkarik commented that his party would probably support BNF's proposal to Milinkevich.

Comment: Irreconcilable Differences In Coalition?

18. (C) The likely delay of the democratic congress is only a symptom of the deep divide in the United Democratic Forces. By all accounts, the split in the congress revolves around Milinkevich. The de facto leader's current point of view that a UDF without his unquestioned "leadership" is not worth his time probably results from a mixture of egotism, bad advice, and reality. Milinkevich's numerous international meetings with NGOs and political leaders have incorrectly led him to believe that he can single-handedly lead the democratic opposition to victory against the regime. Moreover, Milinkevich has suggested to us that he receives counsel from relatively marginalized opposition figures, such

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as human rights NGO Charter 97 leader Andrei Sannikov and formerly imprisoned activist Mikhail Marynich. Sannikov and Marynich have never believed in a united opposition that includes parties and have deliberately kept a distance from all coalition activities. That said, Milinkevich's relatively high name recognition (even among average Belarusians) and his deep contacts with the independent NGO community in Belarus cannot be denied.

19. (C) It appears that the coalition has reached a fork in the road. One path for Milinkevich and the parties is to agree to drop the pretense of a unified opposition and work separately. Milinkevich indicated to the Ambassador that he must dedicate more attention to the "third sector" and coordinate the activities of non-party and civil society activists. Another path for Milinkevich and the parties is to acknowledge their mutual dependence and reach a compromise on the leadership question. BNF leaders tell us that Milinkevich has agreed to discuss his concerns about the congress and the general direction of the UDF in several "townhall meetings" with party leaders and regional coalition activists in Minsk and the regions February 17-20; at the same time, we have already learned that Milinkevich has begged off the February 17 trip to Gomel, citing health

reasons. Ideally, those meetings will facilitate a final decision on the future of the UDF. While the parties clearly lack a joint policy, Milinkevich's indecisiveness and inconsistency make it unlikely that the UDF will again speak with one voice.

Stewart